

# A Critical Metaphor Analysis of TikTok's Image in *The Economist*

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**Abstract**—The research picks up six reports about TikTok in *The Economist* and tries to reveal the image of the app in *The Economist* based on critical metaphor theory. Drawing upon the MIPVU procedure, the research sorted out metaphors in the corpus and classified them into different types by their source domains. According to statistics, human metaphors, journey metaphors, construction metaphors, and conflict metaphors are most frequently used. Food metaphor and light metaphor take up a small portion. These metaphors cover many aspects of the app, reflecting the attitude of *The Economist* towards TikTok. Some are positive and some are negative. They reflect the magazine's complicated attitude towards the app.

**Index Terms**—Critical metaphor theory, image, *The Economist*, TikTok.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese internet companies developed fast in the past decade and some of them have become transnational companies. When they expanding overseas, they would face different ideologies. How they are perceived would also be different. As an important mass media, magazine can reflect and shape the public's opinion. It is an important source to study the attitudes of a certain group. According to Charteris-Black (2004), metaphor is a conscious discourse choice of language users to achieve specific communicative purposes and a discursive strategy to highlight ideology [1]. The paper tries to explore TikTok's image in *The Economist* and hidden attitudes towards it through analyzing metaphors.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Metaphors used to be seen as a rhetorical means only. In 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proposed the concept of conceptual metaphor in the book *Metaphors We Live By*, which has revolutionized metaphor studies [2]. The two scholars proposed that metaphor is pervasive in people's life. It's a critical cognitive means to understand the world. Their ideas blaze a new path for metaphor studies. Then, some scholars noticed the role of metaphor in critical discourse analysis (CDA) and shift the focus to its social functions. Charteris-Black (2004) argued that metaphor is the carrier of ideology [1]. In 2004, he put forward critical metaphor theory (CMA), with which to explore intentions hidden in discourses.

Now, CMA is widely applied in discourse analysis. Some scholars studied the characteristics and ideology of certain

texts through research on the usage of different metaphors. For example, Li Ke (2020) compared frequencies of different metaphors in Xi Jinping's discourse about ecology to bring out his ecological views [3]. Some scholars just focused on one type of metaphor. For example, Chen Zichen (2020) did a study on illness metaphors and tried to find psychological effects intrigued by them [4].

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. CMA

There are three stages in CMA-metaphor identification, metaphor interpretation, and metaphor explanation [5]. The thesis will follow these three steps to conduct the research. Metaphor identification requires screening out metaphors in the corpus. Metaphor interpretation is to dig out cognitive and pragmatic factors lying behind metaphors. The last step-metaphor explanation is to explore correlations between metaphor and social context [6].

### B. Conceptual Integration Theory

#### 1) The network of conceptual integration

There are four mental spaces in the conceptual integration model as shown in Fig. 1, namely: input space I, input space II, a generic space, and a blended space [7]. In the first stage, elements from the two input spaces are partially matched by cross-space mapping. Then, these elements are selectively projected into the blended space, where a dynamic meaning construction is available. The blended space inherits part of the structures from the two input spaces, while it has its own special structure. The abstract structures or organizations of generic space are usually shared by two input spaces. At the same time, the generic space defines the core in mapping.

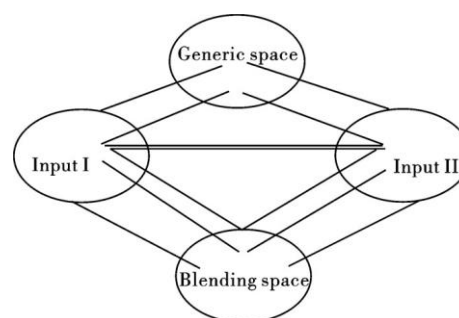


Fig. 1. The model of blended space.  
Fauconnier(1997).

#### 2) The combination of conceptual integration theory and CMA

Conceptual integration theory has a similar purpose to

CMA. Both of them are to dig out attitudes, values, and ideologies hidden in language [8]. Wu Jianguo, Gong Chun, and Song Yue (2020) combined the two theories and created a new model. The model is shown in Fig. 2.

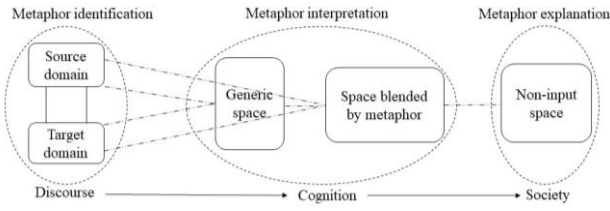


Fig. 2. The combination of conceptual integration theory and CMA. Wu Jianguo, Gong Chun, Song Yue (2020).

#### IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

##### A. Research Questions

- 1) What source domains are used to shape the image of TikTok in The Economist?
- 2) What image does TikTok present in the reports?
- 3) How do metaphors help to construct Tik Tok's image in The Economist's reports?

##### B. Corpus Collection

The research took TikTok as the topic keyword, searching related articles from January 2019 to November 2020 in the app of The Economist. There're six articles in total. One was published in 2019. The remaining were released in 2020.

##### C. Research Methods

The research employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. The method of quantitative analysis is mainly used in metaphor identification. Qualitative analysis lies in the interpretation and explanation of metaphors.

#### V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

##### A. Metaphor Identification

In 2007, Pragglejaz Group developed a protocol called MIP to identify metaphors. The protocol compares the basic meaning with contextual meaning to decide whether there exists metaphor. In 2010, scholars of VU university made some refinements. They supplement direct metaphors—indicating those with clear metaphor signals such as like, as if. They call the new procedure MIPVU [9].

Based on the MIPVU procedure, the research picks out all metaphors related to TikTok in the corpus. Kovecses (2010) concluded some common source domains in metaphors [10]. Referring to his study, the research sorts out six main source domains: human, journey, construction, conflict, light, and food as shown in Table I.

TABLE I: THE NUMBER OF METAPHORS PROJECTED FROM SIX SOURCE DOMAINS

Source domain	Number
Human	68
Journey	32
Construction	20
Conflict	17
Light	7
Food	5

##### B. Metaphor Interpretation

###### 1) Human metaphor

“Human” is the most important domain in these metaphors. From the perspective of linguistics, human metaphors can be regarded as “personification”. In this kind of metaphor, some abstract things are endowed with the qualities of people. Human activities, human emotions, and human motivation all can work as source domains. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) put it, people are inclined to talk about unfamiliar abstract things with more familiar concrete entities [11]. Undoubtedly, human themselves is one of the most familiar domains for human. As a result, it is often used in metaphors.

- 1) The *China connection* has Washington in a tizzy.
- 2) It may one day generate revenue from e-commerce, like its *Chinese sister* app, Douyin.
- 3) President Donald Trump fears that it could hand data on Americans to China's Communist authorities, despite protestations by its *parent company*, Bytedance.
- 4) The White House says it fears that users' data are being sent to China, where *Big Brother* can spy on them.

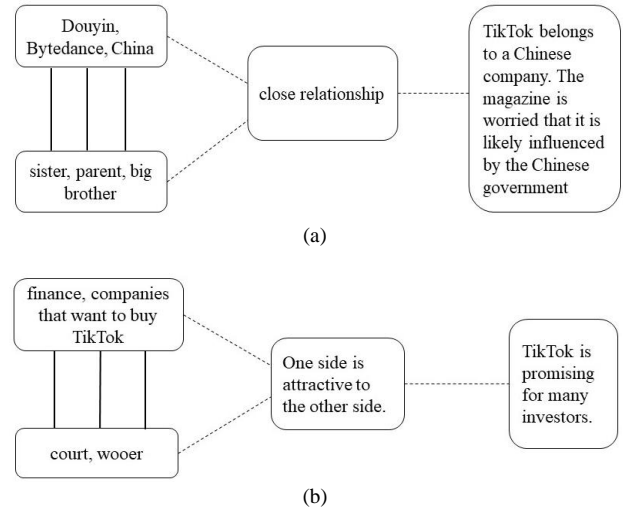


Fig. 3. (a). The analysis of human metaphors; (b) The analysis of human metaphors.

The sentences presented above all contain human metaphors. They can be deconstructed as Fig. 3(a) shown. Western countries have scruples on TikTok for the app's Chinese nationality. This point can be sensed from metaphors. The first sentence means that the app's China kinship worries the United States. “sister”, “brother” and “parent” are both blood relations. The usage of these metaphors can remind readers of the app's indivisible relation to China.

- 1) It has also *courted* foreign investors.
- 2) None of TikTok's *wooers*, including Oracle and Microsoft, has much experience running a social media platform.

“Court” and “woo” are both human activities trying to win the love of someone. The concepts are borrowed to show the popularity of TikTok among investors as Fig.3(b) tells. The first sentence appears in the article published in November 2019. The verb “court” shows the app's efforts to raise funds overseas. Wooers are companies that want to take a slice of the app after Trump's ban on it. In these examples, business behaviors are described as courtships. In a courtship, one side must be attractive to the other side. TikTok is sought-after in

the description, which indicates its competence. The app is promising for many investors.

### 2) Journey metaphor

A journey is a common activity in people's lives. It could be a concrete journey like traveling to a place. It could be an abstract journey as well such as the journey of life.

- 1) In a way, the app is only *riding on* other social networks.
- 2) In May it *leapt further ahead* of other technology "unicorns".
- 3) TikTok, China's first *runaway* web success
- 4) All these worries would be allayed if TikTok turns out to be a passing fad
- 5) Official unease about TikTok has *risen* with its popularity.
- 6) They are disappointed that ByteDance failed to *head off* TikTok's political travails
- 7) its Chinese parent is *scrambling for a way* to hang on to its hit app
- 8) But Ms Pappas is resolute: "TikTok is not *going away*."



Fig. 4. The analysis of journey metaphors.

Fig. 4 illustrates how the development of TikTok is related to a journey. The sentences above picture the development of TikTok as a journey. Through metaphorical words "ride", "leap further of", and "runaway", the app's road to success is vividly depicted, but the journey is not flat at all and would be bumpier next. TikTok's rivals hope the app is "a passing fad". They can't endure its lasting success. At the same time, America's unease about it has "risen". Investors are disappointed that Tik Tok failed to "head off" a political mire. Bytedace is trying to figure out a solution. It "took steps" to assure the American government, but the term "scramble for a way" shows how difficult it is. However, its manager said that "TikTok is not going away." It shows Tik Tok's determination on the opening of the global market.

### 3) Construction metaphor

People build countless houses and other structures for living, working, and so on. Static objects of a house, its parts, and the act of building often serve as source domains[10].

- 1) Byte has *built* its empire by making products that appeal beyond China.
- 2) it (TikTok) is part of an ambition to *build* a global software giant.

In the examples listed above, Bytedance is actively building its business globally. A building cannot be done overnight. It takes steps from the construction of foundations to the roof. The promotion of Tik Tok is one of the most important steps in Bytedance's global empire. The failure of it will prevent Bytedance from achieving its final goal.

- 1) How to *build* a better Tik Tok: reconstituted
- 2) In a recent paper Dipayan Ghosh and Josh Simons of Harvard University propose a third way, more fitting for what the authors call "algorithmic infrastructure"—utilities for the *digital public square*. Governments should set a broad

framework and let platforms experiment within it, the authors suggest. TikTok could become just such an experiment.

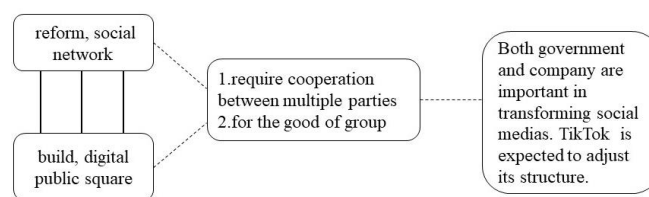


Fig. 5. The analysis of construction metaphors.

The two examples from the same article, which discusses the future of TikTok after Trump's ban on it. Construction work and company reform have many common characteristics as Fig. 5 shows. The author put forward the statement "How to build a better TikTok: reconstituted" at the beginning of the article. TikTok is seen as a building. To pull through the crisis, the article thinks it should be reconstructed. A solution from two scholars of Harvard university is introduced. The two scholars designed an "algorithmic infrastructure". Governments build an overall framework and platforms run in it. The article suggests that Tik Tok experiments with such a structure.

### 4) Conflict metaphor

Conflict metaphors often appear in competitions. Business is a field. Competitors are rivals. Each side uses all kinds of means to destroy rivals and gain success.

- 1) In America and Britain it *rivals* YouTube for user attention—and not just among teenagers
- 2) Facebook is pulling out the big *guns*...
- 3) It is cold comfort to Mr Zuckerberg that should his *defenses fail*.

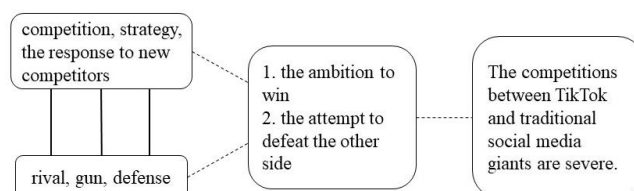


Fig. 6. The analysis of conflict metaphors.

Fig. 6 shows how conflict metaphors picture the competition between TikTok and other companies. In the domain of war, Youtube and Facebook are Tik Tok's enemies. TikTok needs to compete for user attention with Youtube. The incumbent social giants are strong and would not be willing to lose their lands. "Gun" is a weapon. Facebook has prepared the weapon targeted at Tik Tok. It's a "defense" war for Facebook.

### 5) Light metaphor

Light is also a basic human experience. In the corpus, some metaphors are projected from lights.

- 1) Tik Tok's popularity over the past two years has shone the spotlight on ByteDance
- 2) Tik Tok is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese tech star.
- 3) The "last sunny corner" of the internet, ... is China's first worldwide internet sensation.

One of the most important characteristics of light is to make things visible. Fig. 7 illustrates how concepts of light are projected into the depiction of TikTok. The metaphor "shone the spotlight" borrows the feature of spotlight which

can make somebody stand out. It shows the importance of Tik Tok for Bytedance. The app has attracted global attention to the company. “Star” is also a source of light. By projecting from the star, the second sentence stresses the success of the company. “Light” can also make blemish more noticeable. In August 2020, TikTok built a new web called “Last Sunny Corner of the Internet”. The web refutes accusations about its threat to US national security. The metaphor “Sunny” tries to build a transparent and reliable image of TikTok. The slogan was used to refer to the app by The Economist.

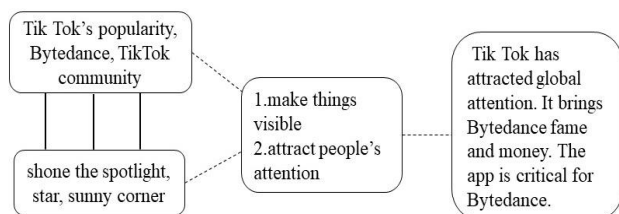


Fig. 7. The analysis of light metaphors.

### 6) Food metaphor

Cooking food is a common activity in daily life. As Kovecses puts it, “the activity with its parts and products serve as an entrenched source domain. Some metaphors concerned with food are traced in the corpus.”

1) TikTok’s main *feed*, called “For You”, is determined by algorithm alone

2) At the same time, many who download TikTok quickly tire of its endless digital *sugar-rush*.

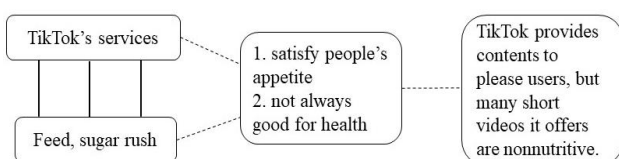


Fig. 8. The analysis of food metaphors.

“Feed” means food. Here, “feed” is contents TikTok recommended to users. Fig.8 shows the relation between TikTok’s services and feed and sugar rush. Although Tik Tok is popular, many people think its contents are of poor quality. The metaphor “sugar-rush” well proves that. Its clips can offer pleasure as sugar does, but the pleasure is superficial. The two metaphors are all about the content of Tik Tok, or video clips it offered to users.

### 7) Summary

Through massive metaphors, the reports convey a vivid image of Tik Tok. Different types of metaphors are used to depict different aspects of Tik Tok. They make characteristics of Tik Tok stand out and also transmit the writer’s opinions towards the app.

Among all types of metaphors, human metaphors take an overwhelming number. Tik Tok is endowed with many characteristics of human beings. Overall, it is depicted as a vibrant teen from China, who has gained global popularity in recent years and is especially favored by teenagers.

The reports provide many details for the app’s path to success. Journey metaphors are frequently employed to depict the path. The app has enjoyed a relatively smooth path in previous years and gain big success. However, it was battered by the ban imposed by the Trump government in

2020. The journey ahead is shadowed by strained international relations.

At the same time, it’s dragged into a commercial war. Conflict metaphors are employed to depict competitions between Tik Tok and other tech giants. The hostility of traditional social media giants like Facebook is strongly signaled by metaphors.

Construction metaphors are used to show Tik Tok’s founding and expansion. TikTok plays an important role in the building of Bytedance’s global empire. However, after the ban, the app may need a new mode to pull through the crisis. The magazine thought the ban could be a chance for Tik Tok to restructure itself and even propel the whole industry to revolutionize the running mode.

Light metaphors just appear a few times. Although with a limited number, they help to rich the description of Tik Tok and strength the position of authors. “Tik Tok’s popularity shone the spotlight on Bytedance”. Through the metaphor “shone the spotlight”, the significance of the app is much more impressive and the report’s approval for the app’s popularity is also clearly shown.

As the app goes viral, the quality of its content has raised many doubts. The economist has similar concerns over the quality issue. Food metaphors like “endless sugar-rush” judge the app harshly.

### C. Explanation

The Economist is a British magazine. In ideology, China and Britain have many differences. But the magazine stands on a relatively objective position viewing Tik Tok and Tik Tok ban. It has its judgment on the app. Some metaphors about Tik Tok are positive while some are negative. The magazine offers a multifaceted instead of the one-sided image of Tik Tok.

In the reports, Tik Tok is young but successful. The app’s popularity and global influence are stressed. As the reports depict, the app is creative and vigorous. It has attracted a mass of loyal users especially teenagers. A mobile-savvy population fueled its soaring. It’s hard to deny what Tik Tok has achieved. In just two years, Tik Tok has emerged to rival companies like YouTube, Snapchat, and Facebook with more than one billion downloads. Metaphors here reflect the TikTok boom in the past two years.

At the same time, the app is compared with Facebook, YouTube, and other online platform giants. Old internet giants are hostile to this Chines upstart. Through abundant conflict metaphors, the reports create a tough competition for TikTok, but they also prove the competitiveness of TikTok.

Besides, the app is resilient. The ban imposed by Trump is devastating for the company’s American market. However, the app is still believed to pull through the crisis by restructuring itself. Different construction models are mentioned. The writer believes it’s a challenge, but also an opportunity for TikTok. TikTok is a new form of social media. As the report indicates, it has fewer constraints to rebuild itself compared with old social media giants.

As for the ban, the reports hold a negative attitude towards it. The suffering of Tik Tok is “an unfortunate sign of things to come”. As the tension between China and the US rises, many companies are sunk into the mire. Transnational companies are victims of strained international relations. The

magazine well notices the great impact of geopolitical tensions on transnational companies and expresses concerns over that.

However, the magazine is cautious of the app's Chinese blood. The app's close connection with China is stressed through metaphors. The reports convey a distrust for Tik Tok especially in privacy protection and fear that it may be influenced by the Chinese government.

Besides, metaphors concerned with the contents of Tik Tok are usually negative. In some way, the app is depicted as funny but superficial. The metaphor like "endless digital sugar rush" is quite harsh. But the criticism of its content has a reason. Even in China, many people rebuke the app for its rush content. The app has been penalized several times for providing vulgar content.

The reports borrow characteristics from multiple source domains. They enrich the expressions to picture the app. Also, they impress readers through the projection from their familiar living experience. Besides, the intention of discourse can be better conveyed by metaphors. Source domains influence how readers see the app. The use of metaphors is decided by linguistic knowledge, the position of the magazine as well as the macro-social context. Metaphors in turn also help us to know the ideologies and social background behind the discourse.

## VI. CONCLUSION

1) There are six main source domains in the corpus: human, journey, construction, conflict, light, and food. Their usage is very different in the corpus.

2) The economist shapes a concrete image of the Tik Tok. The app is a glaring internet upstart. It's one of the few Chinese companies that can gain such global popularity, but the app is far from being satisfied. It has bigger ambitions in the global market. However, its Chinese blood, strike from competitors, western governments' hostility could drive the app to the brink. An internal revolution is needed. The app is thought to have the potential to restructure itself.

3) Many metaphors in the corpus contain implicit opinions on the app. By analyzing them, readers can get a deeper understanding of the reports.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author Chen Yuying finished the whole paper on her own.

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